

Salome reveals a Wilde genius

It's the Roman Ambassador I feel sorry for. There he is, poor man, the guest of honour at a trying official function diplomatically toying with his goblet as all hell breaks out around him.

He is caught in the middle of crossfire as his host, Herod Antipas, Tetrach of Judaea, and wife Herodias lay into each other George and Martha style (as in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*), their warring interrupted by Salome's braying for blood and the booming voice of doom from the prophet imprisoned in an offstage well.

But at least he gets out alive...

You can always expect something different from the Alton Fringe Theatre, and this was borne out by their choice for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, which was given a one-off airing at Alton's Maltings Centre.

Oscar Wilde's *Salome* has little in common with his better known works apart from the richness of text and exquisitely barbed put-downs exchanged between the characters.

'A Tragedy in One Act' · it tells of a torrid night in which Salome, furious at having had her amorous advances rejected by the prisoner Iokanaan (John the Baptist) agrees to dance for her step-father in exchange for 'whatsoever thy soul desireth',

As is well known, her desire is the head of Iokanaan on a silver charger - announced after a well performed, if unusually modest, dance of the seven veils by Jo Foulkes. Herod, already rendered superstitious and twitchy by his surroundings of squabbling Pharisees and Sadducees and reverberating prophecies - not to mention the sudden suicide of his captain of the guard - pleads at length with her to accept anything else he can offer. With these offers comes the height of a virtuoso performance by Tim Guilding, while Chris Chappell as Herodias revels in her opportunity to goad him every step of the way. The play ends in a crashing climax of murder and mayhem after Herod gives in and the cold-blooded assassin-soldier (Dom Gwyther) carries out his grisly assignment.

A brief forum was held after the play at which director Michael McGreevy was asked how the play, written in French, was banned in England until its first public performance on these shores in 1931. Ostensibly, he replied, it was because biblical names were not allowed to be used in the theatre, although the general prejudice against Wilde in the late 19th century probably played its part.

"People are surprised this is Oscar Wilde," said Mr McGreevy. "To me it reveals his genius because it's so different and so rich"

Jacky Billington

